DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 209 PS 023 038

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TITLE Blazing the Trail: The Village Schools of Save the Children/USA in Mali. Education For All: Making It Work. Innovations Series, 4.
INSTITUTION United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Paris (France).
REPORT NO ISSN-1020-1025
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 37p.; Photographs may not copy well. For other documents in this series, see ED 369 535 and PS 023 036-039.
AVAILABLE FROM Basic Education Division, UNESCO, 7 place de Fortenoy, 75353 Paris 07, SP, France.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Literacy; *Community Involvement; *Curriculum Development; Educational Innovation; *Elementary Education; Equal Education; Foreign Countries; *Literacy; *Nonformal Education; *Partnerships in Education; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Mali; Nongovernmental Organizations; Save the Children Federation

ABSTRACT

The principle of primary education has long been established in the impoverished sub-Saharan nation of Mali, but despite official affirmations in favor of access to education, Mali still has one of the lowest rates of primary school attendance. This booklet describes the efforts of Save the Children/USA in mobilizing community support for 22 schools in rural settings. The introductory chapter describes the country of Mali and its paradoxical situation regarding education. The next chapter emphasizes how a primary school in Mali differs from all other schools in the world because it is a village school, entirely independent of the State; this is the outcome of Save the Children/USA, a non-governmental development organization. The subsequent three chapters describe the organization's role in promoting education. Adding an education element to its program involved a literacy campaign for adults, with a special emphasis on women, and providing support for primary schools. The village school was conceived as a result of the adoption of the Bangladeshi approach to basic education, which depended on complete commitment of the village communities. Beginning with 4 village schools in 1992-93, the experiment proved conclusive, and within 2 years, 50 villages had asked for the creation of a village school. The achievements of the organization discussed in the next three chapters concern: ensuring respect for the equality of sexes among the pupils, motivating national and international non-governmental organizations operating in this field in Mali, and inspiring programs initiated by the government. One of the several questions raised in the chapter entitled "Prospects for the Future" concerns the future of Mali children when they leave the village schools. Included in the booklet are descriptions of some specific features of the Mali branch of Save the Children/USA. (BAC)

EDUCATION FOR ALL

Making it work

4

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The village schools of Save the Children U.S.A. in Mali

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Blazing the trail

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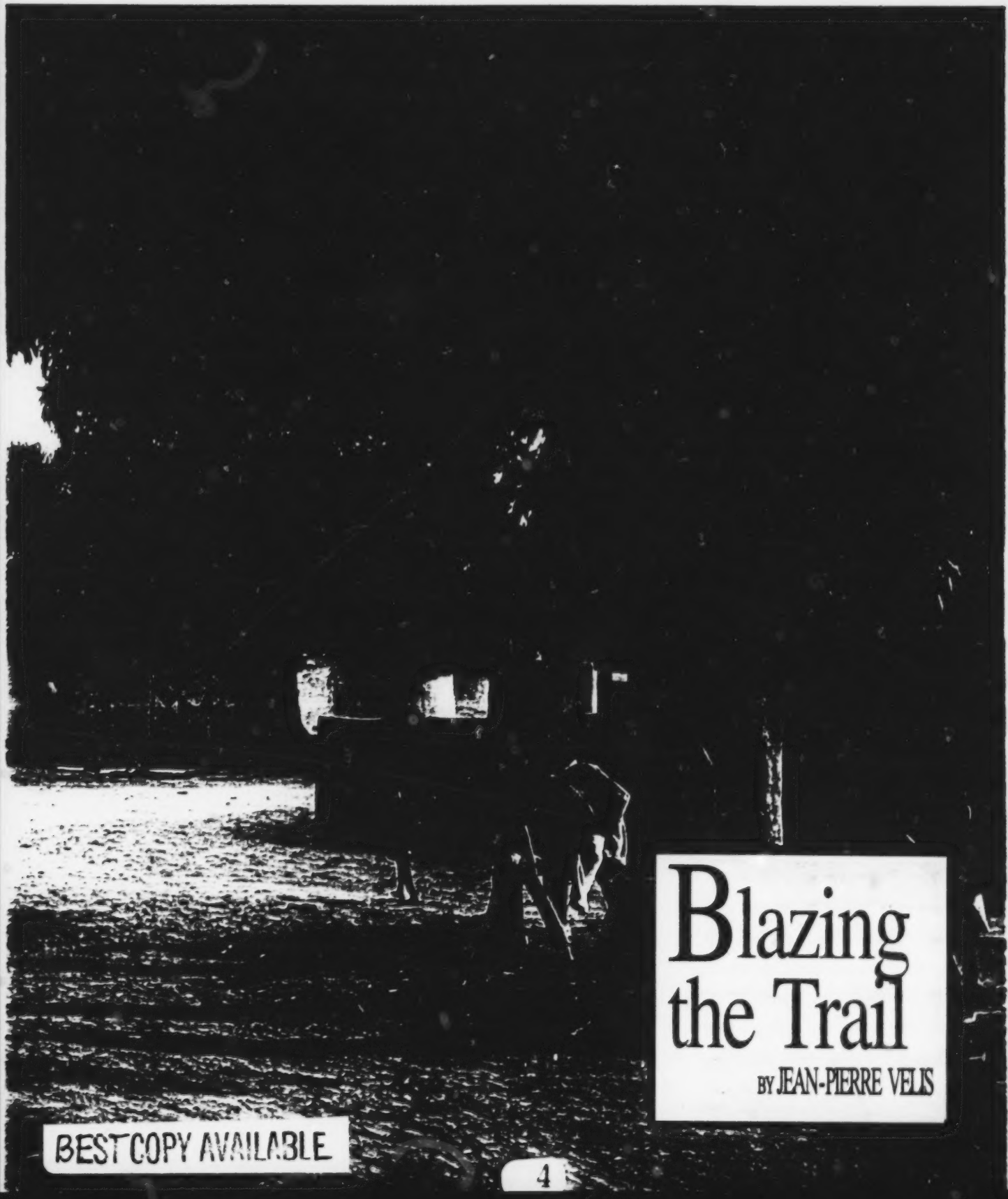

Blazing the Trail

BY JEAN-PIERRE VELIS

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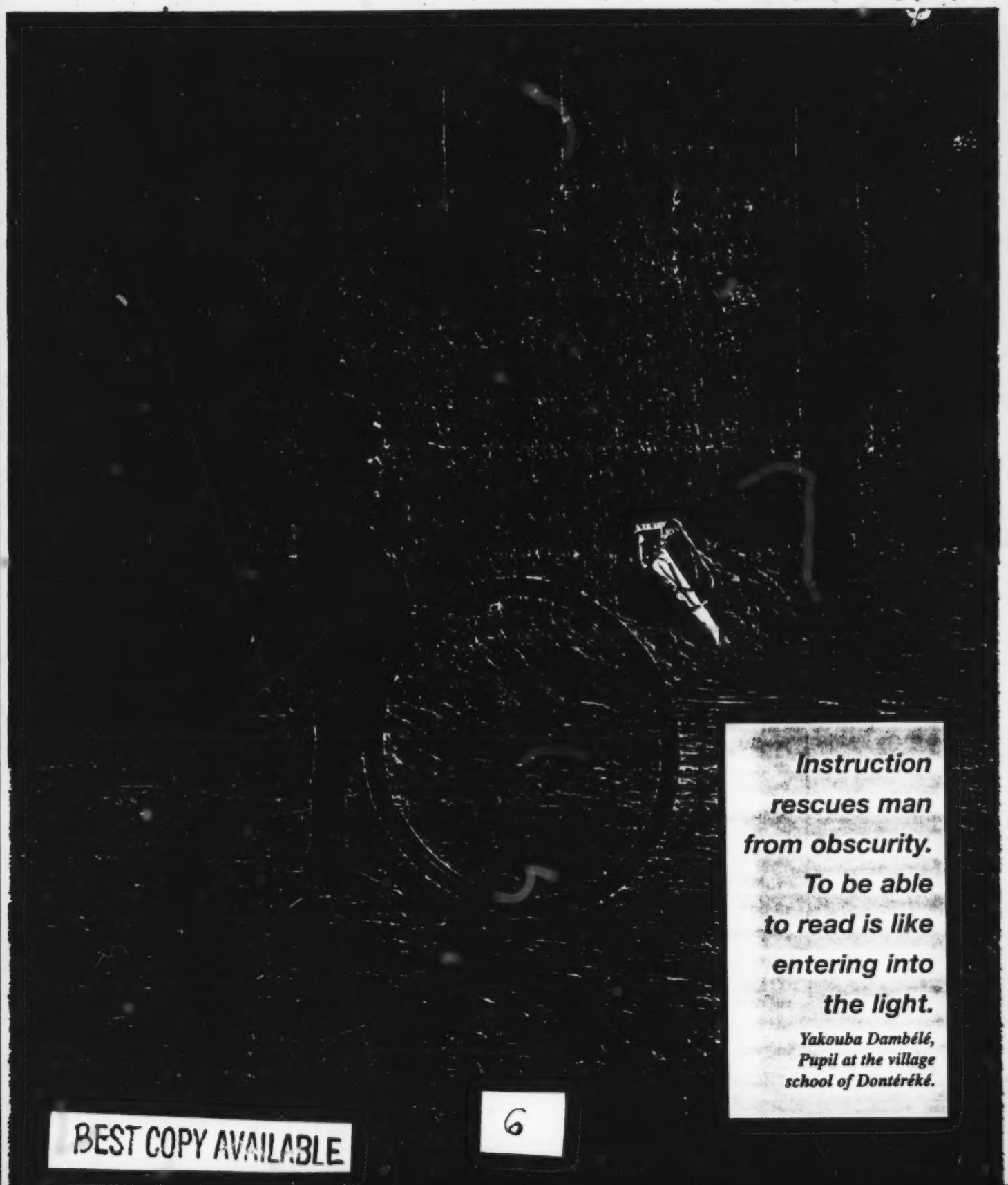

Instruction rescues man from obscurity. To be able to read is like entering into the light.

Yakouba Dambélé, Pupil at the village school of Dontéréké.

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Introduction :

A token of liberty

Learning to read and write is an affirmation of liberty

Mali, a land which covers a vast area of sub-Saharan Africa, with no outlet to the sea, is essentially a rural country. Industrial activity is extremely limited. The country's mineral resources are as yet barely exploited and output from the agricultural sector, although it is the source of the greater part of its income from exports, is subject to the fluctuations of the world market and to the ravages caused by periods of drought and invasion by locusts, making Mali one of the poorest countries of the world.

Although economically poor, Mali has a rich culture and history. Many peoples – the Bambara, Bobo, Bozo, Dogon, Kasonke, Malinke, Moors, Minianka, Peuls, Sarakole, Senoufo, Songhai, Tamasheks, Tukulors – have coexisted for centuries in a glorious mixture of languages and traditions.

The principle of primary education for all has long been firmly established. The Constitution guarantees the right of every Malian to education and the main objectives already laid down by the educational reform of 1962 were the encouragement of high quality mass education and the democratization of education by the development of basic education and literacy.

Furthermore, of all the countries of West Africa, Mali has the longest experience of literacy initiatives – it was selected as the pilot country for the Experimental World Literacy Programme and the first literacy centres were opened there in 1968. More recently, after playing an active part in the World Conference on Education for All, held at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, Mali became further committed to the struggle against illiteracy. Democracy came to Mali in March 1991, with the investiture of Alpha Oumar Konare as President – the first Head of State of Mali to be democratically elected.

The present government of the Third Republic includes a Minister of Basic Education and, as further proof of its dedication, devotes nearly a quarter of its budget to education. At least three-quarters of this goes to running costs, mainly teachers' salaries.

There is, however, a wide gap between intentions and reality. Enormous obstacles still stand in the way of social, economic and cultural development. Despite repeated official affirmations in favour of access to education, Mali still has one of the world's lowest rates of primary school attendance – about 20 per cent – which, in view of

Mali has one of the world's lowest enrolment rates – less than 20 per cent.

the high rate of population growth, represents a steady diminution since 1980.

Alphar Oumar Konare is well aware of this. Questioned on the matter in April 1993, he replied: "Democracy takes time [...]. The democratic foundations of the State can never be fully consolidated without the massive participation of the rural populations. They will remain fragile as long as the literacy rate in the Republic of Mali remains so low. Learning to read and write is an affirmation of liberty. It is a *sine qua non* of a greater involvement in the democratic management of affairs. The country is in a serious situation. We have fought for democratic change, but fewer and fewer people have access to decent schooling; this is a harsh blow to democracy [...]. Guaranteeing a democratic way of life means improving and extending the basic education system."

This is a challenge that the village schools are doing their utmost to take up.

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Education in action

At first sight, this school appears to be just like many other primary schools throughout the world. Yet it differs in one striking way – it is the village school, independent of the State and owing its existence entirely to the will and the combined efforts of the whole village community, which wanted it to be established.

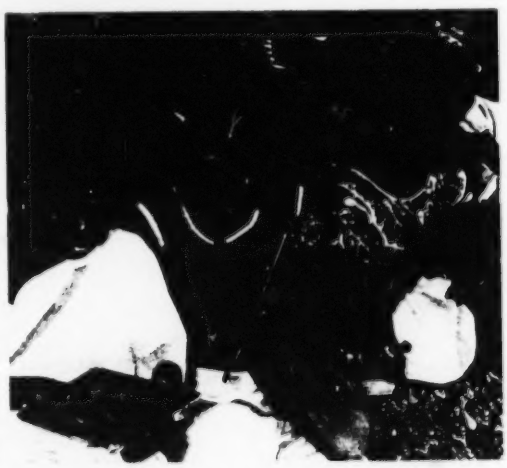
When visitors arrive, the children stand up and start to chorus the Malian national anthem, which they sing in their mother tongue Bamanankan (Bambara). The classroom is filled by thirty children, aged about ten, boys and girls in equal number, their brightly-coloured dresses, shirts, bedizened T-shirts and the girls' kerchiefs, multi-coloured necklaces and earrings bringing a welcome touch of colour to offset the corrugated iron roof, bare walls and earth floor. The anthem completed, the children sit down again and take up their tasks.

This morning, as on nearly every morning for the past six months, they have come to study with *their* teacher, in *their* school, in *their* village. The class is a lively one and there is great competition to attract the attention of the teacher so as to be questioned. On this occasion a girl has been called upon. With obvious pleasure she goes up to the blackboard and deciphers the words written upon it. Syllable by syllable she recites them aloud, pointing with a ruler at each word as she goes along: The whole class repeats each word after her at the top of their voices.

Later in the morning, they go on to other exercises. Using short sticks they do adding up exercises, which they then transfer to their slates. Again, one of the pupils goes to the blackboard and, turning to face the class and brandishing his sticks, counts out loud. The class, in chorus, repeats his additions with enthusiasm.

Classes last two hours, during which time the children have had lessons in reading, writing and mathematics, have expressed themselves orally and have performed other sensory exercises, under the guidance of a teacher and his or her deputy. This is how a typical school day goes at Néguéla, Ntiobala, Dontéréké, or in any one of the fifty or so village schools in the Kolondièba administrative district.

At first sight, this school appears to be just like many other primary schools throughout the world. Yet it differs in one striking way – it is the village school, independent of the State and owing its existence entirely to the will and the combined efforts of the whole village community, which wanted it to be established. Otherwise, barely two years earlier, the majority of the children who attend it today would have had no chance whatever to go to school and to learn to read, write and count.



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The children chorus in their mother tongue, Bamanankan

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An obstacle to be overcome

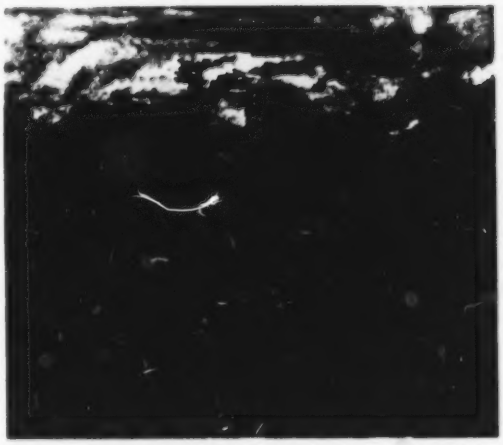
In a typical village in Kolondièba, there were only about half a dozen literate people.

The Sikasso Region in the south of Mali, which borders on the Côte d'Ivoire, is by no means the poorest part of the country. On the contrary, precipitation is abundant during the rainy season making this a favourable area for agriculture. The main crops grown are cotton and rice.

It was in this area that, in 1987, the American non-governmental organization Save the Children/USA decided to give assistance in response to a call for help from the Malian Government. Originally the objective was to help settle the Dogons and other nomadic peoples who had been driven down from the north by the great droughts of 1970 and 1980. A preliminary study led to the choice of the District of Kolondièba, where both the administration and the people had shown themselves to be more ready than most to welcome these immigrants looking for humid lands on which to raise their cattle.

The District of Kolondièba has a population of some 140,000 inhabitants spread over 207 villages the largest of which, the small town of Kolondièba, has a population of 6,000. The district, which covers an area of 9,000 square kilometres, has virtually no infrastructure. There is no electricity and there are no tarmac roads.

From the start Save the Children/USA took advantage of the existence of community organizations, including village associations and the traditional "*ton*" or "age groups", on the basis of which it was able to set up in each village committees responsible for each of the four initial areas of activity – water, agriculture, health and credit, savings and small businesses. The programme was not imposed from the outside. Proposals were made and these were negotiated with each Village Chief and with each Council of Elders, that is, with those with whom real authority



lies in each village *(cf. Diamogo – a Village without a School).*

During the first two years action was limited to fifteen pilot villages, with the exception of the health programme which, from 1988, aimed to cover all 207 villages in the district. However, the programme soon came up against a major obstacle. Despite the functional literacy campaigns undertaken previously by the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles* (CMDT), directed particularly towards men, illiteracy remained widespread within a population that proved to be incapable of making rational use of hygienically-produced water supplies, of maintaining and managing wells and agricultural equipment or of keeping accounts.

Furthermore, the prospect of rapid improvement was slight. For the approximately 30,000 children of the Kolondièba District of school age there were only thirty primary schools, attended by 4,321 pupils (a school attendance rate of just 14 per cent). Thirteen of these schools were situated in the five largest villages. For the other

The programme was negotiated with the Council of Elders, with whom real authority lies in each village.

202 villages there were only seventeen schools which received children from the surrounding villages. To attend school, therefore, pupils had to walk several kilometres every morning and evening or else be accommodated on the spot. These problems led to considerable repetition, failure and drop-out, as well as sexual discrimination, and affected girls in particular.

In 1988, therefore, Save the Children/USA added an education element to its programme. This involved a literacy campaign for adults, with a special emphasis on women, and providing support for primary schools (supplies for primary schools in the district and the organization of sporting and leisure activities). In a typical village in which these initial activities took place in Kolondièba there were, at the start, only half a dozen literate people, two of whom had been to school. At the end of the first year 320 people had become literate, of whom 40 per cent were women. Encouraging though this result was, it was not sufficient to guarantee the long-term efficacity and continuity of all the elements of the programme after the cessation of external assistance.

In 1991, Save the Children/USA gave its backing to a project set up by the Ministry of Basic Education and financed by the World Bank through the Fund for Aid to Basic Education. Within the framework of this project, the World Bank lent the Government of Mali 75 per cent of the cost of building permanent, three-classroom schools in accordance with current standards (the cost per classroom was about US$10,000), the remaining quarter of the cost being borne by the village communities in which the schools were built. Since this amount (US$7,500) was usually beyond the village budgets, Save the Children/USA agreed to assume this cost at the rate of one school per year, which was done in 1991 and 1992. At this rate, however, it would have taken two centuries to equip each village with a school. The alternative, it seemed, would have been to invest a minimum of US$6 million over the next ten years to provide the 621 classrooms needed for the 207 villages of the Kolondièba District – something that was clearly out of the question, at least for Save the Children/USA.

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In partnership with the community

The villagers themselves build their schools.

In 1992, deeply impressed by an innovation in basic education introduced in Bangladesh and known as BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Save the Children/USA decided to adopt the Bangladeshi approach whilst adapting it to the Malian context. As a result, a new model school was conceived – soon dubbed "The village school" – based on the following hypotheses:

* it should be possible to reduce the cost of primary schooling (without affecting its quality) by adapting it to the realities of the communities involved and to the resources available;

* subject to the provision of adequate training, each community should have the necessary financial and human resources to be able to provide and maintain quality primary education for its own children;
* the national political climate lent itself to the decentralization of education and conditions were propitious for good collaboration between the government, the non-governmental organizations and the communities.

From the start, Save the Children/USA gambled on obtaining the true, wholehearted and lasting commitment of the communities involved. There was never any question of acting in their place but rather of helping those village communities wanting to do so to provide their children with the possibility of getting an education. In view of the reluctance of many families to send their children to be educated in a school system in which they had lost all confidence, this certainly was a gamble. The attitude of many rural Malians is summed up by the question: "What is the use of sending our children to school if it does not guarantee them a good future and in addition deprives us of the help we need to cultivate the land?" What the Save the Children/USA project was gambling on was that, despite everything, there was nevertheless an unsatisfied demand for education to which the communities themselves would be prepared to respond.

The villagers themselves were to build their schools, with Save the Children/USA supplying the materials needed – corrugated iron for the roof, metal-framed doors and windows, the sanitary equipment for two latrines, desks and benches, a blackboard, a table, a chair and a storm lantern – for a total cost of about 240,000 F.CFA (Francophone African Community Francs), or US$1,200, about thirty times less than the cost of an official primary school. Save the Children/USA also undertook to provide the educational materials (books, paper pens and pencils, etc.) for the first year, at a cost of about US$300.

In principle, enrolment was to be restricted to children of the village, with a special effort being made to give girls equal access, the ultimate aim being have one school per village attended by boys and girls in equal numbers.

The teachers were to be reliable, respected members of the village community. Literate in the Bambara language, they had to have spent five years in a formal school or to have been previously trained by Save the Children/USA as literacy teachers. The village community would be entirely

responsible for their salaries. Each pupil's family would make a monthly contribution of 100 F.CFA, (about US$0.40) with the Village Association paying a monthly allowance of 500 F.CFA (about US$2). Thus, in a class with thirty pupils, each teacher would receive a salary of 3,500 F.CFA (about US$12.80) a month. The teachers would work two to three hours a day and be free to use the rest of their time working in the fields or in other activities. In comparison, the average basic salary of a teacher in a formal primary school is about 30,000 F.CFA a month (about US$110).

The curriculum covers a three-year period during which the pupils receive instruction in reading, writing and mathematics. The pupils are also taught as much as possible about village life, health, work and local activities as well as being given information that will be useful to them in daily life in general. School terms are fixed to fit in with the rhythms of agricultural activities. School begins in November, at the end of the harvest, and continues up to the beginning of the rainy season in May. Pupils spend two to three hours a day in class, six days a week, over six and a half months of the year.

Each school consists of two classes with thirty pupils in each class, one for 6- to 10-year-olds, who may go on to attend formal schooling after a period of three years in the village school, and one for 11- to 15-year-olds who may thereafter become involved in local community activities, such as the village credit, health and agriculture committees.

Each village has to set up a School Management Committee consisting of village personalities, parents of pupils and at least one literate person. The Committees are responsible for the supervision of the schools, the recruitment of pupils, control of the teachers and the maintenance of the school buildings. In order to be able to do this they are trained by people acting for Save the Children/USA.

For its part, Save the Children/USA undertakes to meet all those needs that the village cannot meet itself, such as the training of teachers, the drawing up of teaching manuals and general supervision. It works in close collaboration with various official partners including, primarily, the Ministry of Basic Education and a number of specialized national organizations. It works particularly closely with the *Direction nationale de l'alphabétisation et de la linguistique appliquée* (DNAFLA) and even more closely with the Institut *Pédagogique National* (IPN). Save the Children/USA also receives backing from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

During a stay in the United States, two members of the staff of Save the Children/USA benefited from the advice of specialists at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, on the drawing up of non-formal educational programmes in collaboration with the target communities.

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A promising start

In August 1992, field officers of Save the Children/USA held lengthy discussions with villagers from communities in which the organization was already active with a view to determining which of the communities fulfilling the criteria established for the project were prepared to accept all the conditions and to embark on a first experimental year. Initially, five "pilot" villages (one per sector of the district) were selected, but two of these withdrew saying that they preferred to await the installation of a formal school (in fact, they later changed their minds and figure among the twenty-two communities that created village schools in 1993/94).

Today, more and more young people write to each other in Bamanankan.

A four-week experimental try-out was first undertaken in a sixth village, in October 1992. Its primary objective was to test the teachers' pedagogical capabilities; it was carried out by the training staff of Save the Children/USA and the IPN. The subjects touched on included basic pedagogics, methodologies for the basic teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, and the planning of courses. In the evenings meetings were held at which teachers in training were able to discuss with their instructors such questions as the importance of education in general, the role of the teacher in the villages, discipline in the classroom, the participation of girls, the role of the School Committee and the maintenance of school buildings.

In November of the same year, therefore, three village schools were opened. To these were added a fourth in January 1993 – in the village in which the four-week experiment had been made. So great had been the success of these four weeks that the children and parents of the village had asked Save the Children/USA to establish a school there. This was a major victory for the staff of Save the Children/USA, since the village was renowned for its opposition over the years to the creation of a formal school in the neighbourhood.

Whilst awaiting completion of permanent school buildings, classes were held under the shade of a mango tree, under a straw shelter or in an already existing literacy centre. The schools were open six days a week, the villagers having generally selected market day as the day they remained closed. During the first year, the schools were supervised by Save the Children/USA staff members (community development officers, organizers of activities for women, village health workers) who had received special basic training for this task. Each school maintained "comments diary" and each teacher kept an "attendance register" which enabled a check to be kept on any possible absenteeism, especially amongst the girls. In February 1993, Save the Children/USA organized a two-week revision course.

The experiment was conclusive. Virtually no absenteeism or dropping out was recorded and equality between the sexes had been respected. The results achieved by the pupils also proved very satisfactory – 87 per cent of them obtained the pass mark enabling them to go on to the second year and they had acquired a generally satisfactory knowledge of the alphabet and of figures and of such operations as addition and subtraction.

It became clear that the village communities really saw the village schools as their schools and were already thinking of the need to ensure their continued existence. For example, all the villages had taken steps to establish funds to ensure the payment of their teachers in the eventuality that

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some parents might not be able to contribute individually. One village even decided on their own account to double the teachers' salaries.

As one member of the Council of Elders of Ntiobala pointed out: "In the past, when you received a letter, you had to go for miles to find somebody who could read it for you. Today, more and more young people are able to write in Bambara. This must continue and no effort is too great to preserve this advantage which we, the Elders, never had."

Finally, the demand remains high. By mid-1994, fifty villages had asked Save the Children/USA for the creation of a village school (twenty-two have already been created in 1993/94 and in 1994/95 the total should rise to over fifty).

The staff of Save the Children/USA are enthusiastic about the future: "Given the low cost of the village schools and the involvement of the village communities, we can reasonably expect that, by the year 2000, there will be 'education for all' and a school in every village in Kolondièba."

87 per cent of pupils obtained the pass mark enabling them to go on to the second year.

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Towards equality of the sexes

There is no real taboo with regard to the education of girls.

Girls are the main victims of the deficiencies of the formal school system and only 8.7 per cent of them attend school. When the nearest school is too far away and the children have to be lodged away from their families, the fee paid to the receiving family represents a considerable effort. A choice has to be made among the children and this is usually to the detriment of the girls. The current rate for lodging a child is two sacks of millet and 2,500 F.CFA. The millet is often soon eaten and the money spent. The lodging conditions of the child become precarious. He or she is often forced to carry out household tasks. This is particularly the case for girls who are not allowed to go to school until they have finished cleaning the hut and done the washing up.

One of the major achievements of the village school, at the end of the first experimental year, is to have ensured respect for the equality of the sexes among the pupils. This seems to indicate that there is no real taboo with regard to the education of girls despite the tradition of early marriage which means that the girls are usually engaged by the age of 11 or 12 and already married at the age of 14.

Furthermore, Save the Children/USA hopes to achieve equal representation of the sexes among the teaching staff so as to enhance the role of women in the community and also to maintain a certain stability, since women are less likely to travel far from their village in search of work. However, given the extremely low rate of literacy among women (5 per cent for women as against 15 per cent for men), this objective is difficult to achieve. Over the first two years of the project only a quarter of the teaching posts have been occupied by women.

Minata Kone is one of these. She teaches at the village school at Ntiobala, where she was born. She is also the daughter of the Head of the village. She is 22 years old, the mother of two children and went to school up to and including the sixth year of primary education. She was chosen by the villagers to go to Kolondièba to take the training course organized by Save the Children/USA and IPN. She went with the full assent of her family and, in particular, of her husband, who is himself literate.

Today she feels different from the other women of the village. "It is a privilege to teach", she says, "since it enables one to express oneself and to make oneself heard among the men." Her position gives her another far from inconsiderable privilege – in her family she is excused from preparing meals and taking part in the work in the fields.

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Blazing the trail for NGOs

Kolondièba is only one District among many in Mali and Save the Children/USA does not claim to have the answer to the basic education needs of the entire country. Other NGOs have a contribution to make to this task and Save the Children/USA can give them the benefit of its experience in this field. In this respect the task has been made easier because, in November 1993, the former Programme Co-ordinator of Save the Children/USA became the full-time Co-ordinator of a Pivot Group for Basic Education which today brings together some seventy NGOs, both national and international, operating in this field in Mali. In view of the important role Suleiman Kanté played in the conception and setting up of the Village Schools Programme, there can be little doubt that he will encourage other NGOs to put it into practice.

In December 1993, the branch of Save the Children/USA in Mali asked USAID for funding amounting to nearly US$8 million for the period 1994 to 2000. This total allows for direct expenditure by Save the Children/USA, the financing of ten Malian NGOs, the strengthening of the literacy programme at Kolondièba, the development of equipment and teaching material, and a contingency fund for various costs and unforeseen expenditures.

Justifying this request, Peter Laugharn, the present Director of Save the Children/USA in Mali, explains: "Save the Children/USA intends to work with 10 Malian NGOs to help 600 villages in 20 Districts to create their own community schools. The project will enable 36,000 children in the rural areas (half of them

Save the Children/USA intends to work with ten Malian NGOs.

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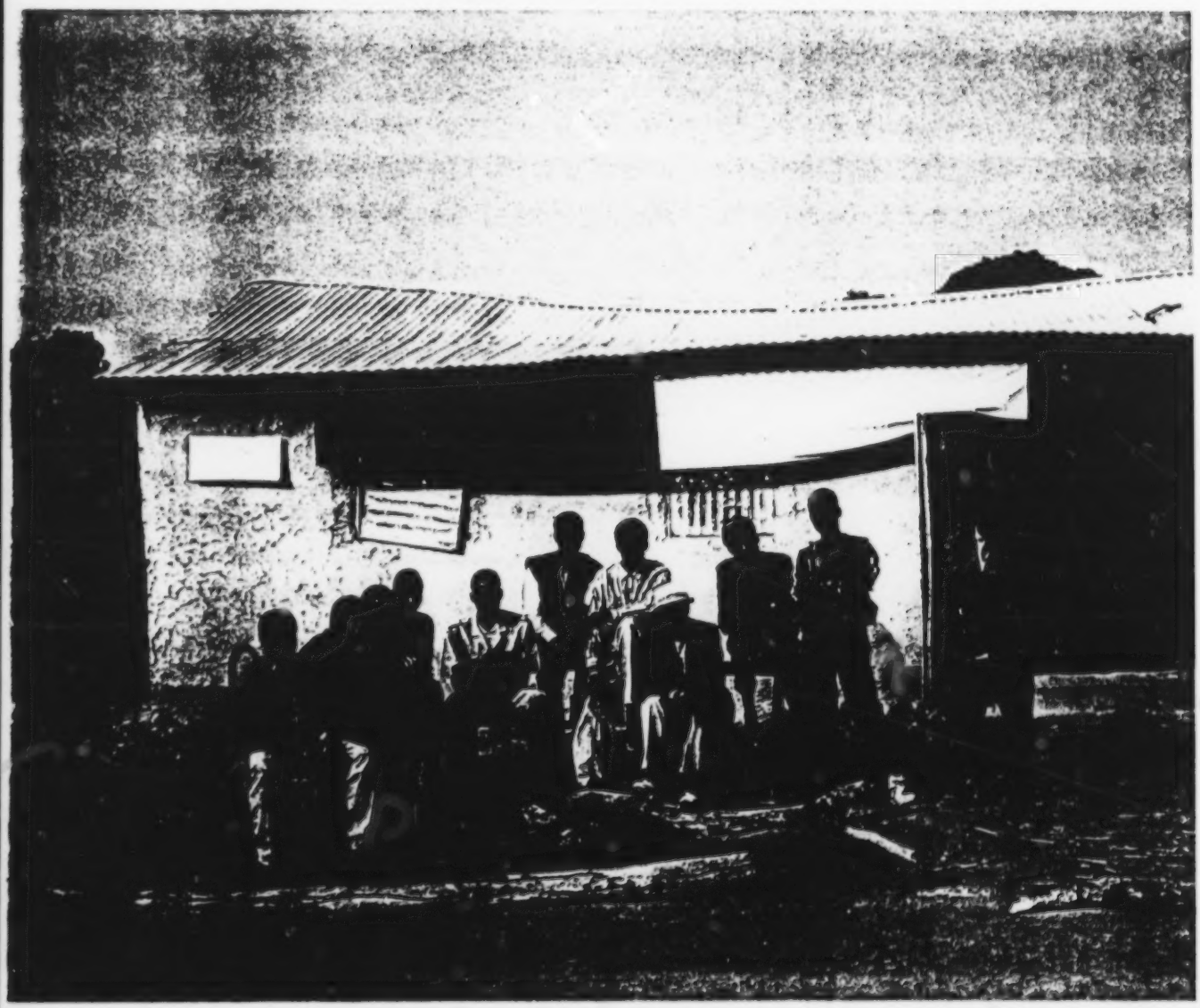

The staff of Save the Children/USA will organize a workshop on the theme: "The Conception of a Village Schools Programme".

girls) to learn to read in their mother tongue and to pursue their studies in the formal education system. The main recurring costs of these schools, such as teachers' salaries, will be funded locally so that the schools will be able to continue to function when the project ends and to recruit 12,000 new pupils each year. There should also be a significant multiplier effect, since the model can easily be adopted by neighbouring villages. The annual cost per pupil is estimated at US$35.86. About half of the village schools' budget will go to Malian NGOs to cover their training and supervising activities in the field. The Village School Project should provide these 10 Malian NGOs with an excellent opportunity to specialize in educational programming which will lead on to the formation of a future nucleus of 'entrepreneurial social skills' in education, whose attention will be directed particularly towards the under-represented poor." In spring 1994 the staff of Save the Children/USA were on hand to organize a workshop at Kolondièba for Malian NGOs at which the theme was 'The Conception of a Village Schools Programme'.

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... and for the Ministry of Basic Education

"Basic Education for All is a profound political choice and current difficulties can do nothing to shake our determination to achieve this goal."

These words of the Minister of Basic Education, M. Samasségou, leave no room for doubt – Basic education is the major priority in Mali today and initiatives such as that of Save the Children/USA need to be publicized and supported. In their own way the village schools have taught the government a thing or two and were the direct inspiration for the governmental programme which began in March 1944 with the opening of the first twenty *centres d'éducation pour le développement* (CED).

"There is an urgent need to face up to the problem of the rapid growth in the number of children of school age who have no access to the formal education system as it is now constituted. The minimum education needs of these young people are enormous and, in view of the limitations of the formal education system, it is essential to explore educational paths, especially in non-formal education which today must be seen as having priority. With this in mind, the Ministry of Basic Education has proposed an alternative strategy for expansion of basic education through the *centres d'éducation pour le développement* (CED)". These words appear in the document published at the time of the setting up of the first twenty centres in the Koulikoro Region. In fact, the strategy, the objectives and the modalities of setting up these centres are an exact copy of those adopted for the village schools. The socio-pedagogical principles adopted with regard to the environment, organization and contents of the centres are a perfect demonstration of this emulation, so closely do they follow those of the village schools. There is however one difference. The centres allow for only one age group, from 9 to 15, whereas the village schools recruit two distinct age groups, children aged from 6 to 10 and from 11 to 15.

There is absolutely no equivocation about the nature of the programme. "It is not a question here of the classic downward approach from top to bottom, the approach adopted by educational technocrats (even the most experienced), but of the meeting of two partners – the providers, from the Ministry to the Rural Development Operation and the NGOs, and the decision-makers/beneficiaries. It is essential for the 'traditional beneficiaries' (that is, the communities, parents and children) to be seen also as the decision-makers, to accept them as such and, in so doing, give them the room they need to manage the education system which they need and they plan." As the Minister also said: "There can be no lasting development unless it is truly taken in hand by the people themselves."

As if echoing these words, the Head of the village of Ntiobala, in the Kolondièba District, encountered during a visit to the village school, declared: "The State is everyone, all of us. The State of Mali does not have the means to educate all the children. We, the children of the State, must stretch out our hands to the State so that it can take them and we can all go forward together. This is a moral obligation which must be assumed. Today, without education, without a minimum level of knowledge, one will get nowhere. It is very difficult to educate an adult. For an adult the effort of concentration needed to learn is often very painful. A child, however, thirsts for knowledge and children can go far, even in just three years. Even if schooling has to stop then, those three years will be enough to make the difference throughout his or her life."

The State is everyone, all of us.

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Prospects for the future

Despite the strength of the convictions of the Head of the village, as expressed in these words, a number of questions inevitably rise as to the future. For example, is a three-year cycle enough to guarantee teaching of a high quality? Is the choice of a national language as the language of teaching a wise one? What lies ahead for the children when they leave after three years in a village school?

It is impossible, today, to answer the first question with any certainty. We will have to wait for an assessment to be sure that the children have not been given a second rate education "on the cheap". All we can do at present is to quote the oft-repeated declarations of intent, on the lines of: "Better a minimum of education than no education at all." We can, however, also mention the provisional observations of representatives of the formal school system, who can hardly be suspected of indulgence. The Director of the formal school of Zéguéré declared that: "village schools are a good idea because we have the same objective – to fight illiteracy in the area." Using a formula that is becoming fashionable, a pedagogical counsellor from Bougouni boldly affirmed: "It is a comforting prospect, within the context of basic education for all – a minimum of quality education for a maximum number of children." He went on to say: "Judging by the lessons I have attended in the village schools, I can assure you that the level of understanding is good. In fact, there is very little difference as compared with the formal school system since the village school teachers have been trained by the experts of IPN." Time alone will tell.

The question of the choice of language in which instruction is given (one of the national languages) and the introduction of instruction in French during the final year (French is the administrative and official language), whether in the village schools or the CEDs, has also raised a few doubts. Will the children be able to apply in French the skills acquired in national languages? The results of an experimental testing carried out in the formal school system in October 1979 were inconclusive.

Having studied the project for the creation of the CEDs, within the framework of a UNESCO/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) mission on literacy training in Mali, consultant Guy Belloncle has his doubts. "How can one expect the centres to succeed in three years when the formal schools are now failing over six, seven or even eight years? As French schools know only too well, because of its etymologically-based spelling, teaching French is real gamble." For him, however, all hope is not lost, for he adds: "But this does not mean that one should deprive all those who show exceptional intelligence of promotion [. . .]. Thanks to present methods of teaching French as a foreign language, it might be thought possible to give children who want to pursue their studies in French the basic structures and to do so in a period of one year." Guy Belloncle recommends the introduction of "what might be called initiation to functional, oral communication with officials or during periods spent in towns", using sound and pictures, as is already being done in two experimental schools in Ségou. Children should also be trained to read the more common signs and notices (Hospital, Police Station, Customs Office, etc.) so as to enable them to find them in the towns.

Others maintain that "one learns to read and write once only". These people base their opinion on the theories of specialists who consider that a person who has learned to read and write in his or her mother tongue, thanks to a kind of positive transfer of capacities acquired in this language to a second language, generally manages to master

Is a three-year cycle enough to guarantee teaching of a high quality?

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reading and writing in this second language without great difficulty, whether it be some kind of lingua franca or another national language.

At all events, the Malian Minister of Basic Education has long had his own profoundly held conviction. During the course of an interview he declared that: "It is not possible for a people to develop in disregard of its own language. All our children must be firmly rooted in their own culture whilst remaining open to the universal."

Inevitably, the future facing children at the end of their three years of attendance at a village school remains uncertain. Two options are open to them. Either they continue their studies – but if so, what line of education is open to them? – or they find immediate use at the local level for their newly acquired skills. The problem lies above all in the choice of the first option and can be summed up in terms of the need for some kind of linking mechanism.

Assuming that the formal school system will be prepared to accept children after their third year at a village school ("The village school can be a means of bringing 'recalcitrants' back to the formal school system", the director of the second cycle at Kolondièba declared confidently), it is not certain that the pupils will be capable of making this jump or how the transfer will be effected.

Here again Guy Belloncle advises caution. "I do not think that it would be possible to envisage their integration into the formal school system as it is at present at whatever level, for pedagogical rather than linguistic reasons. Many experiments carried out throughout the world have shown the almost insurmountable obstacles which stand in the way of transferring of pupils from institutions in which education is active and participative and aimed at giving the pupil the maximum autonomy to classic institutions where the teacher is seen as the sole fount of all knowledge.

Two possibilities remain to be examined:

a) integration of these pupils into a second cycle, itself re-thought and renovated (for example by prolonging the experiment now being carried out in two schools in Ségou on the value of which the final evaluation should soon be pronouncing); or,

b) the creation of a "special track" (a kind of second cycle of the CEDs) conceived of as a form of progressive transition towards technical and professional instruction rather than towards more general education.

All these questions are now the subject of in-depth discussion between Save the Children/USA, the Ministry of Basic Education and the communities concerned, since it is a matter of urgency to find answers and to take enlightened decisions before the rapidly approaching time limits are reached.

One thing is certain, during visits to the village schools, those who use and benefit from them – children, parents and representatives of the

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communities – are inexhaustible in their expressions of enthusiasm and satisfaction. In this they will undoubtedly soon be hearing an echo at the very highest level, since the President of the Republic has expressed his desire to visit the village schools of the District of Kolondiéba in the near future.

The movement is well and truly launched and it will be allowed no respite. In the words of a woman of the village of Ntiobala: "When a bird is tired and comes to rest, it runs the risk of being caught by the children who will play with it. So long as it is in flight it is in no danger."

Some villagers have decided to go from a three-to a six-year cycle (above).

"We, the children of the State, must stretch out our hands to the State so that it can take them and we can all go forward together"

Head of Ntiolaba village

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Making it work

FEATURES

Save the Children/USA in Mali

The background study carried out in 1987 by Save the Children/USA enabled the needs of the peoples to be identified and resulted in the launching of an integrated programme of rural development covering four sectors: village water supplies (in particular the digging of wells for the supply of drinking water), agriculture (the provision of agricultural supplies and equipment, initiation into techniques for the prevention of soil erosion, the development of low-lying land as rice fields, etc.), health (especially primary health care for babies and children), credit, savings and small enterprises. Later, it was found necessary to add education to the programme as an additional sector.

In 1992, the Mali branch of Save the Children/USA was employing 105 staff with an annual budget of just over US$1 million divided as follows: 44 per cent for health, 27 per cent for multi-sectorial activities, 12 per cent for agriculture and water, 10 per cent for education and 7 per cent for credit and savings. Later, Save the Children/USA trained personnel for the co-ordination, supervision and follow-up of the village schools. In April 1994 seven staff were exclusively allocated to this sector of activities.

The target population of Save the Children/USA, particularly with regard to health care, is spread over 250 villages and goes beyond the limits of the Kolondieba District, since it includes some 45 villages of the Zantiebougou locality which is part of the neighbouring Bougouni District.

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Area: 1 240 000 km²

Population: 9 362 000

Annual average growth rate (1980-1990): 2.9 per cent

Infant mortality: 159 per 1000 live births

GNP per capita (1991): US$280

Capital: Bamako, 800 000 inhabitants

Principals ressources :

Agriculture, cotton.

Illiteracy: *68 per cent*

Men: 59.2 per cent

Women: 76.1 per cent

Human Development Indicator *(1990): 0.082*

Public expenditure on education

(as percentage of GNP 1988): 3.3 per cent

Share of expenditure on education in the State budget *(1988): 17.3 per cent*

Net enrolment rate in primary education

(1988): 18 per cent

Boys: 23 per cent

Girls: 14 per cent

Internal efficacity of primary teaching:

Repetition rate (1988): 30 per cent

Percentage of the 1987 cohort reaching the final grade: 40 per cent

Sources : UNDP, UNESCO.

Whilst awaiting the completion of permanent school buildings, classes are held under the shade of a mango tree, under a straw shelter or in an already existing literacy centre.

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Save the Children/USA and some villages in Kolondieba have recently decided to go from a three- to a six-year cycle. The communities will continue to pay the teachers' salaries (at least in part), keep up the buildings and run the school.

The children will still go to their village school. At the end of the sixth year they will obtain a primary education certificate, enabling them, if they so desire, to apply to the second cycle of the district. At the end of the cycle, the pupils will master written Bambara and French at the same level as in formal schools. They will have received an education which is immediately relevant and firmly entrenched in their environment, and which will allow them to enter the next level of education.

The village teachers, whenever possible, will be promoted from the first half-cycle to the second. For this, they will nevertheless have to pass a French language examination. The teachers in the second half-cycle will receive a higher remuneration than those of the first half-cycle, but always within the financial reach of the village and in negotiation with its members.

As a recognition of the efforts of the community, Save the Children/USA will ask the State to build a permanent school with one or two classrooms in every community that has accomplished its three first years. The state will also provide the teachers with certificates after the first and second three years, even if the education given is not paid for by the state.

The national assembly is close to voting a very flexible law on community schools, which will open the doors for other initiatives. The perspectives are promising.

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Karim Sangare is 32 years old and lives at Ntiobala. He never went to school and until barely five years ago he was still an illiterate peasant. Today he is a schoolteacher and teaches the children of his village to read, write and count. Not until he was 27 did he himself become literate thanks to an intensive, three-month literacy course organized by the Malian Company for the Development of Textiles in order to encourage agricultural development. Karim was such a star pupil that he himself became a voluntary literacy teacher and secretary of the village association before becoming a schoolteacher at the village school created with the backing of Save the Children/USA.

Karim Sangare explains that to fulfil this function one must first earn the trust of the community. Then one has to be very much at the disposal of others. "Some people are perhaps more cultivated than I am", he admits, "but I am capable of passing on what I know." Finally, one has to be trained. Karim attended a special one-month training course run by the staff of the Institutut pedagogique national.

Nevertheless, he considers that he still needs to acquire further knowledge and says that he is ready to receive additional training "anywhere and at any time".

Suleiman Sidibé feels he has similar needs. Comparing literacy training for adults with teaching children, this 40-year-old teacher at the village school of Néguela, not far from the frontier with the Côte d'Ivoire, observes: "There is no problem with adults. They know that it is in their interest and they want to learn as much as possible and they listen to their literacy teacher. The children, however, are easily distracted and the teacher has to be both patient and vigilant. On the other hand, the children have an ability to learn that the adults have not got. It took me a year to learn what the children learn in a few weeks." Their speed of learning is such that he fears they will soon have caught up with, if not overtaken him. This is why he feels he needs to complete his training. As a child Suleiman Sidibé went to school for four years, but his living conditions and his lodgings were such that he finally gave up and went home. School was obligatory so to "make himself forgotten" by the authorities, and also to a lesser extent by his family (who had made a considerable financial effort to send him to school), he fled to the Côte d'Ivoire. He returned to his native village after an absence of two years, but he soon left again, this time for many years. While working there he acquired some elements, mainly oral, of French. When he finally came back to Néguela for good, he was surprised to discover that literacy courses for adults had been organized by the Malian

One has to outdo oneself to be worthy of this trust. Failure is not permitted.

(Douananmousso Koné, second year teacher at the Dontéréké Village School).

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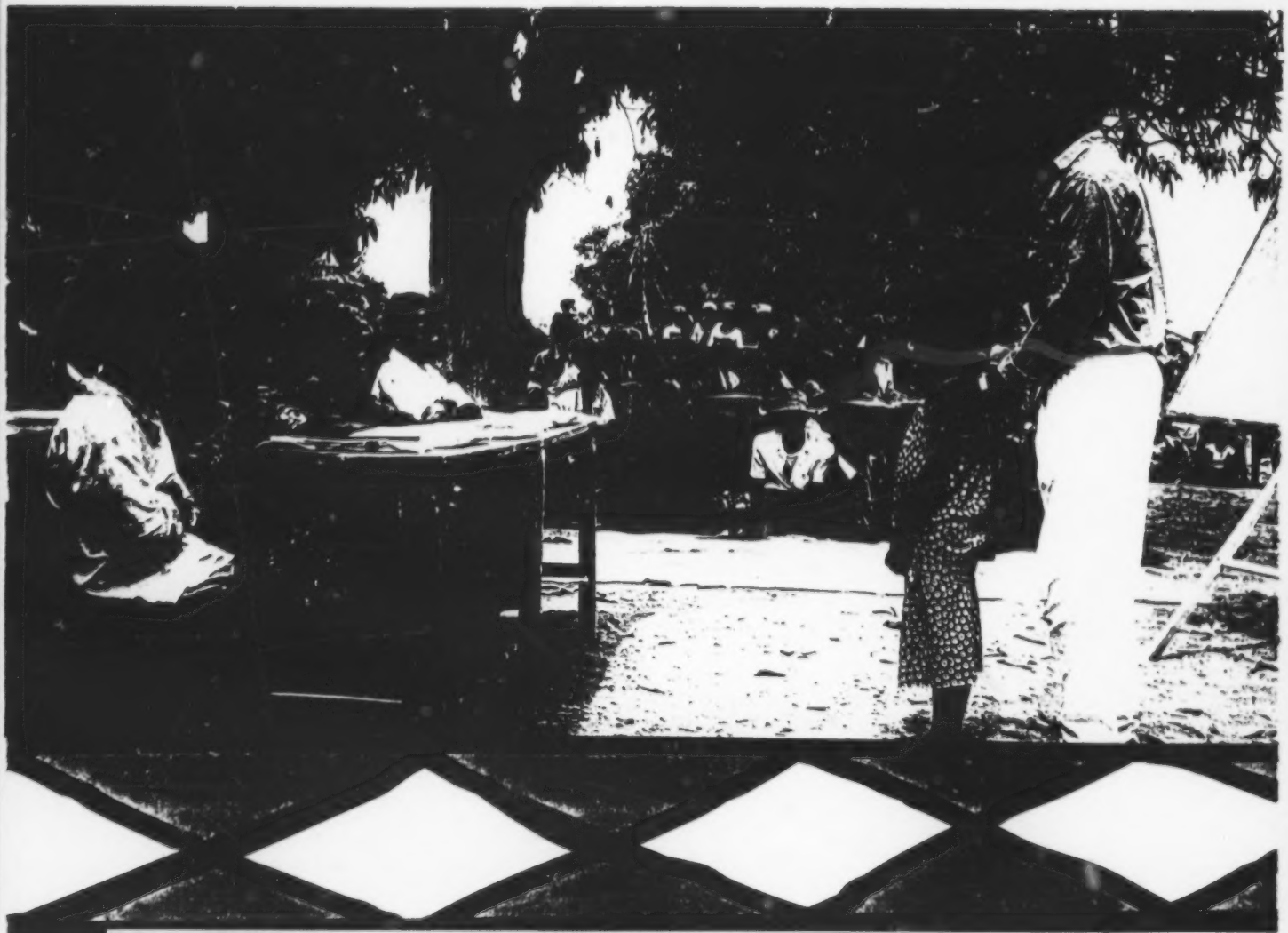

Company for the Development of Textiles. After taking advantage of the course himself, he became a literacy teacher and was also put in charge of the sale of agricultural produce for the village. When Save the Children/USA began its project, he became the schoolteacher at the village school, being replaced as the literacy teacher by a woman. "The school must come closer to the communities, so that the children do not have to leave their familiar surroundings. In my day, school was thirty-five kilometres away. I would never have thought that one day there would be a school in my own village."

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Diamogo

That mid-afternoon in April it was nearly 40 degrees in the shade of the mango trees. Most of the inhabitants of the village had heard that a meeting was to be held. Chairs were brought with footstools for the Head of the village, members of the Council of Elders and guests of passage – the co-ordinator of the non-formal teaching sector of Save the Children/USA and a visitor from UNESCO. The women sat together a little apart behind the men, whilst clusters of children of all ages gathered at the foot of the great trees. Diamogo is a village without a school of any sort and the representative of the Save the Children/USA was taking advantage of his visit to discuss this question.

In accordance with custom, he spoke first to the Head of the village to inform him of the purpose of his visit. Having heard him out, the Head of the village then addressed another Elder and told him what had been said to him. This Elder then addressed another Elder and did the same. And so it went on, from Elder to Elder, and "the word circulated" in strict order of descending hierarchy. Having reached the last Elder the word was "passed up", following the same ritual but this time in ascending order, until it reached the Head of the village again. Then, and then only, the discussion could begin. Since each family was represented on the Council, it was sure that everyone in the village had been informed of the purpose of the meeting.

This traditional form of discussion, which is repeated systematically at the beginning and end of every visit to a village, is also a guarantee for the NGO of the real engagement of the community in the proposed activities.

In discussion it emerged that the villagers had heard talk of the village school system and that, although they had not yet placed a formal request with the NGO, it was their firm hope to have a village school one day. They had not just sat idly by. They had visited a neighbouring village which had a school, had taken measurements and had already put up a building on the same model. They had also carried out a census of the children who might attend it.

Why did they want a village school? There had long been literacy classes organized for the adults of the village, but they felt that it took a long time to get results. As they saw it a village school could "attack the problem at its roots." As one woman pointed out: "School acts more quickly against illiteracy than mere literacy courses."

Some of the children at Diamogo go to the formal school and others used to attend but have given up; these are the drop-outs. What difference did the villagers think there was between the formal school and a village school? According to them, learning was easier at a village school because the mother tongue was used whereas at "the French school" pupils had to learn the language and how to write it.

They hope that the village school will bring enhanced mutual understanding in the village and the prospect of working together better and thus of achieving higher yields, with consequent benefit to everyone. In fact they have only a hazy idea of the effort they will have to make, but, whatever contribution is expected of them, they say that they are prepared to make it. The meeting ends as it began. The "word circulates" among the Elders, each in turn making brief comments, until it comes back to the Head of the village. The latter then wishes the visitors "a good journey" and they may then leave.

A breakdown in education

Apart from the low rate of school attendance (under 20 per cent), there are considerable problems to be overcome. The government itself has established an uncompromising list of these problems in the document concerning the establishment of twenty CEDs in the Region of Koulikoro (Upper Valley of the Niger Operation Zone):

- a high wastage rate of the order of 84 per cent in the first basic cycle and 71 per cent in the second cycle;
- important regional disparities which influence the levels and process of development in the regions;
- a lack of teaching staff in terms both of quantity and quality;
- training programmes not adapted to socio-economic realities;
- unsuitability of the language used for teaching - it is still French, the official language of Mali, despite experiments in the introduction of national languages in the formal school system;
- under-development of non-formal education which absorbs too few young school drop-outs and illiterate adults.

This same document concludes: "Over thirty years, decision-makers and funding agencies have attempted to provide solutions to these different problems, adaptation of the content of programmes to the realities of the milieu and to development needs, programmes of ruralization in basic education, strengthening of technical and professional training, intensification of literacy programmes for children and adults, campaigns to encourage school attendance by girls, and so on. The means invested are considerable but the results still remain extremely poor. The efficacity of the system needs to be re-examined so that lasting mechanisms leading to progress may be put in place."

In other words, as we approach the third millennium there still remains much to be done if education for all in Mali is to become a reality.

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Education for All. Making it work is a major international UNESCO programme to collect, analyze and promote successful basic education projects in the developing world.

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Photography : Save the Children (pages :1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 21, 24, 27, 28, 31)
Ines Forbes, UNESCO (cover and pages : 4, 6, 10, 14, 15, 21, 22-23, 29)

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of l'UNESCO

Printed by Egoprint, Paris, France

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Special thanks to the following for their assistance in obtaining materials and sharing valuable information:

M. Arion, *Delegation of the ECC, Mali*

N'Golo Coulibaly, *Ministry of Basic Education, Mali*

Tansini Doumbia, *Bougouni, Mali*

Souleymane Kanté, *Pivot Group/Basic Education, Bamako, Mali*

Peter Laugham, *Save the Children/USA, Mali*

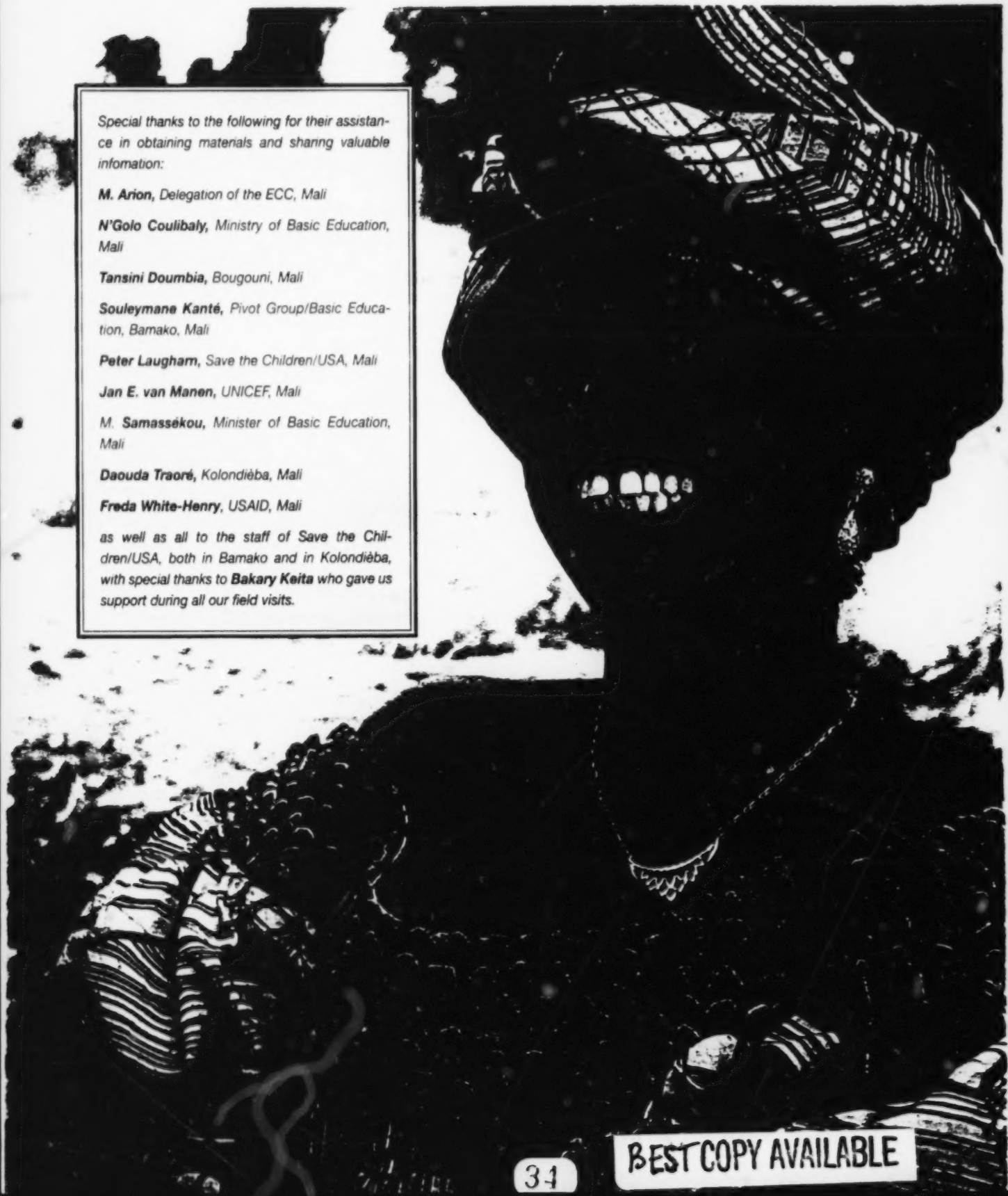
Jan E. van Manen, *UNICEF, Mali*

M. ***Samassékou,*** *Minister of Basic Education, Mali*

Daouda Traoré, *Kolondiéba, Mali*

Freda White-Henry, *USAID, Mali*

as well as all to the staff of Save the Children/USA, both in Bamako and in Kolondiéba, with special thanks to ***Bakary Keita*** *who gave us support during all our field visits.*



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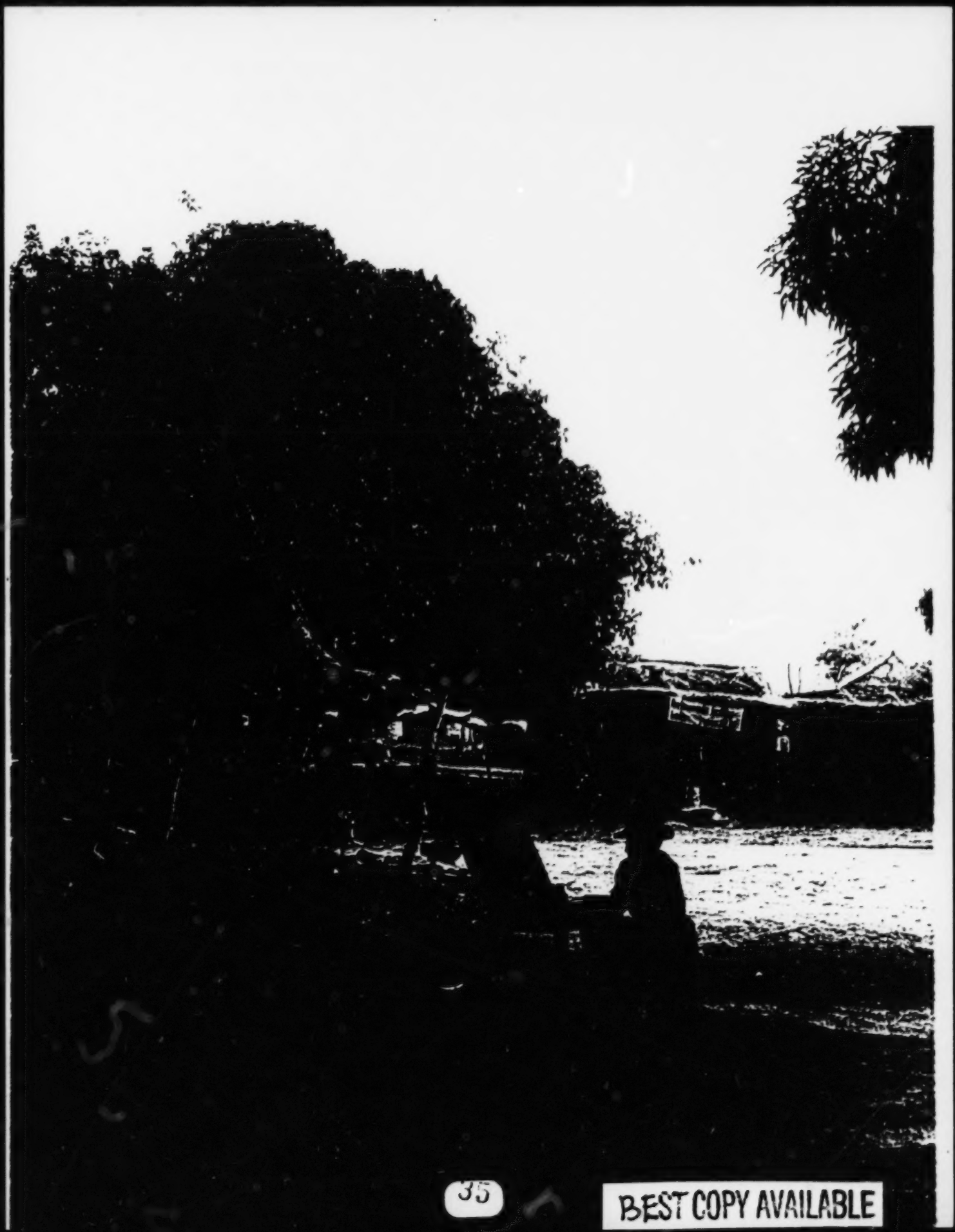

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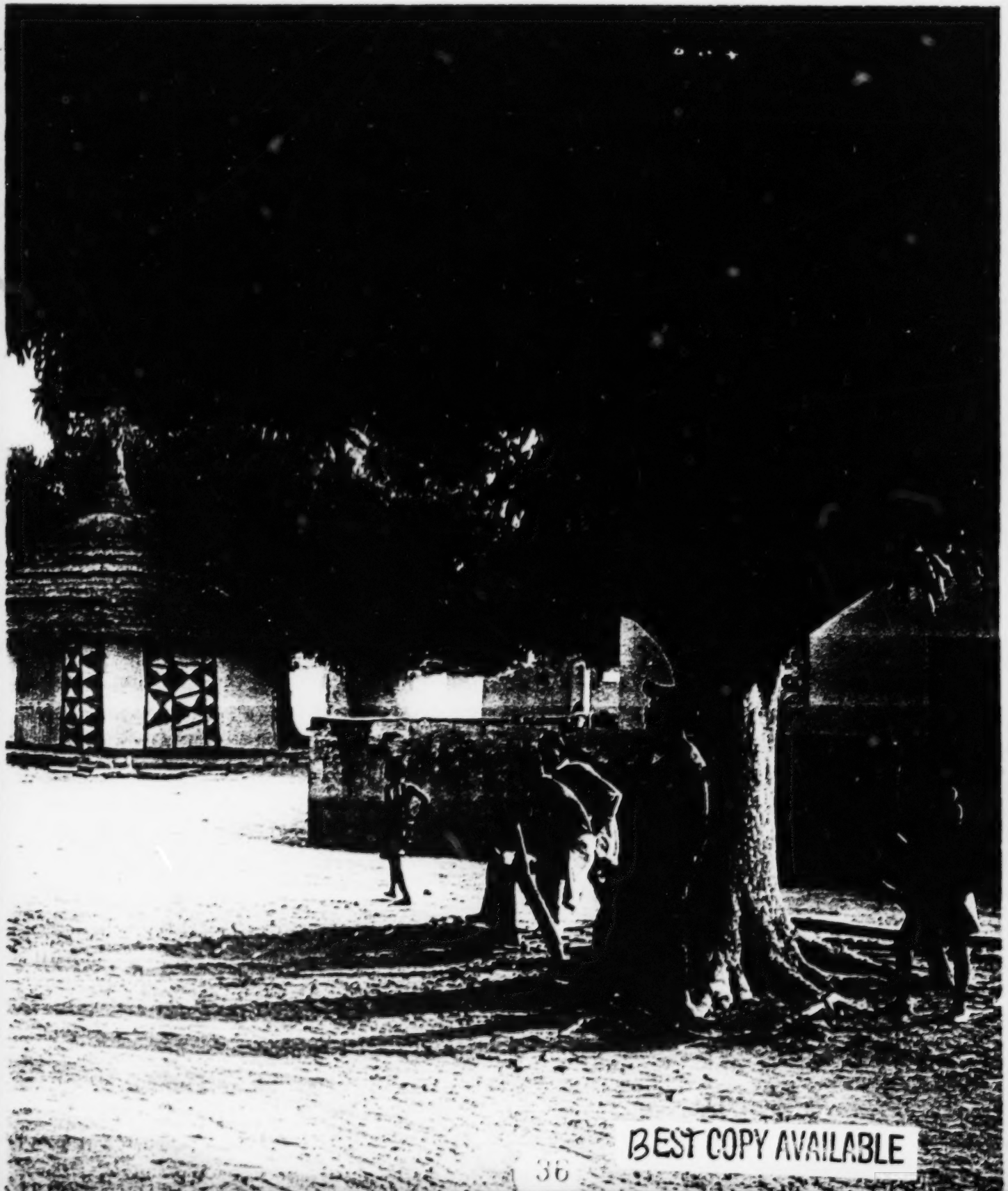

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where 80 per cent of children never set foot in a classroom. Save the Children/USA launched the Village School Programme in 1992. Its founders realized that parents needing help in the fields felt little incentive to send their children to a faraway school that no longer guarantees a respectable white-collar job in the city. In spite of this reality, Save the Children/USA has succeeded in mobilizing community support for twenty-two schools in rural settings. Inspired by this example, fifty other villages have asked to participate. One of the project's major achievements is the high enrolment of girls, traditionally the first ones to suffer from the deficiencies of the formal school system and the tradition of early marriage. The village school proves that there is no insurmountable taboo with regard to the education of girls.

Classes are held in Bambara, the local language, and teachers recruited from the community. Schools are built by the villagers with materials provided by Save the Children/USA, at about thirty times less than the cost of an official primary school. The curriculum covers life skills relevant to village realities and the school terms are adapted to the agricultural calendar. Teachers are paid by the villagers and trained by the Save the Children/USA and the *Institut pédagogique national*. By working three hours a day they have time for other productive activities. With its low costs and promising results, the village school project may be one way to bring education to a majority of Malian children. As emphasized by President Alpha Oumar Konaré, learning how to read and write is a *sine qua non* of a greater democratic participation, and it is "an affirmation of liberty."

UNESCO's programme Education for All, Making it Work has selected the village school as a showcase project to promote community-based education firmly entrenched in rural areas, particularly in Africa.

The editors

Making it work

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Telephone: (33-1) 45 68 10 00, Fax: (33-1) 40 65 94 06
ISSN 1020-1025

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